



A SKETCH  
OF THE  
EARLY HISTORY OF WICOMICO  
COUNTY AND SALISBURY, MD.



APRIL, 1923.

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For The Wicomico Woman's Club  
Salisbury, Maryland

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A Sketch of the Early History of Wicomico County  
And Salisbury.

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*"Breathes there a man with soul so dead  
Who never to himself hath said  
This is my own, my native land."*

If a Scotchman could express so inspiring a sentiment as this, with how much more fervor should a native Eastern Shoreman be able to say it!

As I consider the scope of the subject before us and my own relation to a subject so big I am reminded of the story of Uncle Eben who felt he had a call to preach.

When examined on his knowledge of the Bible he was asked, "Who was the greatest woman in the Bible?" and this was his reply, "Jezbell was de greatest woman in de Bible. Of cose, Jezbell was de greatest woman in de Bible—when de sojers were walking round de walls of Jerico dey looked up at a winder and dey see Jezbell and dey say frow dat woman down and dey frowned her down and dey say frow her down seven times and dey frowned her down seven times and dey say frow her down seventy times seven times and dey frowned her down seventy times seven times and of de fragments dey did pick up twelve baskets full and de deesciples said, 'Lord in de Judgment Day whose wife will she be!'"

From my fragmentary review gathered from books, persons, and places, I hope you may get a more correct and more beautiful picture than that presented by Jezebel's reconstruction, and when we have finished our journey today, I hope we may all be able to say with proper pride, this is my own, my native or my adopted land!

If history can be trusted, our section of Maryland now known as the Eastern Sho' has always been a favored spot, a coveted garden. As early as 1627 King Charles

I. of England gave instructions to the Governor of Virginia to explore this land and William Claiborne, then Secretary of the Virginia Colony, was sent out to adventure in the Chesapeake Bay and its Eastern tributaries.

While on this expedition he traded with the Indians for furs on what we now know as Kent Island. A settlement and subsequent trading post soon were established here. This island was named by Claiborne "Kentish Isle," and when the Calverts in 1632 came into possession of the Province of Maryland, they called the whole upper section of the Eastern Shore lying north of the Choptank River the "Isle of Kent."

From this time on, history was in the making in this section and as early as 1642 we find mention of the "Sheriff of Kent County." Kent is our oldest County. Wicomico is our youngest. While early Colonial History relates that all the section lying North of the Choptank River was known as the Isle of Kent, the same records tell us that all the territory South of the Choptank was called the *Eastern Shore*. This section originally known as the Eastern Shore was later formed into Somerset County, 1666, and Dorchester County, 1669. About 75 years later, at the request of some of the inhabitants and by act of the Provincial Assembly the Eastern section of Somerset County bordering on the Atlantic Ocean was made into a new County known as Worcester County. Ten years prior to this, in 1732, by Act of Assembly, a town, known as Salisbury, was laid out. This Town was located near the headwaters and at the forks of the Wicomico River.

Up to 1867 a part of this town was in Somerset, while the rest of it lay in Worcester County, the dividing line between being Division Street, then known as Dividing Street, in Salisbury. All residents on the East side of this Street had to attend Court in Snow Hill while those on the West side were obliged to go to Princess Anne.

This worked a great hardship and such dissatisfaction arose from the inconvenience, that the leading residents of Salisbury made a prolonged and heated fight for the formation of a new County of which Salisbury should

Page Four

be the County Seat. This new County would take one-third of the territory from each of the other two Counties and was strenuously opposed by the leading citizens of Somerset and Worcester. However, in 1867 by Act of a Constitutional Convention permission was granted for the formation of a new county when the Act should be ratified by the voters in the territory affected. Thus in 1867 Wicomico was made the ninth and youngest county on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. It is directly with the history of our County and town that we wish to deal today.

In the early history of our country the water ways were the chief means of transportation and commerce and naturally along the streams the first homes and settlements were built. The original name of our river was Rockiawackin, an Indian word, the meaning of which is not known. Proof of this is found in several of the oldest patents from the Land Office at Annapolis. As the white settlers came in and built homes and churches along this water front the Indians began to call the river Wicomico which means "Where houses are built." This is according to the late Judge Upshur Dennis and others who have made a study of Indian names.

On the banks of the Wicomico River may be seen the oldest buildings of our county. Perhaps the best known to us is old Green Hill Church built in 1733 which date may be plainly seen inlaid in brick at one end. Linking up history we find this was the year of the settlement of Georgia, 13th of the Original Colonies. The bricks for this old Episcopal Church were imported from England. The building stands in good repair today and is one of the treasured spots of our county.

The settlement of Green Hill (1706) was made an early port of entry and an over-land trail of communication from here to Lewes, Del., was established.

The settlement of Green Hill was laid off in 100 lots. The old church was built on lot No. 16. Sir Richard Copley, the first Royal Governor of Maryland, in 1692, made the Church of England the established church of the Maryland Province and Green Hill was the Parish Church of Stepney, one of the original parishes.

Page Five

Both without and within, the old church is quaint in appearance and bears the hall marks of antiquity. The pews built in the form of squares with straight up backs and a little wooden door of entry, suggest a certain necessary uprightness of posture which is more fully assured when one glances at the high, all-commanding pulpit at one side. Most of the ministers were loyal to the British Crown, so much so that one writer of this period says, "the clergy were deprived of support, vestries ceased to exist and the churches were closed with few exceptions."

During the Revolution and until 1783 there was no rector of Stepney Parish. On a trip to old Green Hill Church some years ago our attention was called to a locked pew. Tradition had it that long after the Revolution was over the minister ventured one Sunday morning to pray for the president of the United States. The occupant of this pew, still a full-fledged Tory, arose in wrath, and taking his family with him locked his pew while with an oath he swore vengeance on any who might dare to enter it. At that time we were told no man had dared to unlock it.

The Ben Davis House built about the same time and said to have been the rectory stands next to the Church but is no longer kept up. These are the oldest buildings standing in Wicomico County today.

Just up the River a short distance we see "Pemberton Hall" built in 1741 and still in a state of preservation. This was the home of the famous Handy family of Maryland. On entering the large colonial front door of this old English brick house one looks into a spacious hall running directly through the lower floor. The entire west end of the house is a large room, where many a light fantastic dance was tripped off by the grand ladies and their courtly cavaliers. This house like the old church bears at one end the inlaid date of its erection, 1741, and it is said to be the third oldest building of our county. The Handy's were extensive land owners in those days and were prominent not only socially but in Statesmanship. Many of them were distinguished lawyers and judges and leaders in the political life of their day.

Page Six

It is a significant fact that many of the oldest names in our county have almost died out among our white population. Some of these are still known among the colored families of today, descendants of the slaves who bore their masters' names.

Coming up the river a short distance we see an old frame building still standing though built about 1741. This, known as the Chase House, according to our historians is the birthplace of Samuel Chase, but I understand our distinguished and contemporaneous historian of Somerset County, Mr. Fillmore Lankford claims proof of the fact that Samuel Chase was born in Somerset below Princess Anne.

Samuel Chase, brilliant scholar, lawyer and patriot is perhaps best known to us as a Signer of the Declaration of Independence.

History and biography allure us here to tarry at the shrine of so great a man. Did time permit it would be interesting also to speak at length of the original Presbyterian Church of our County built on the Anderson Farm at Upper Ferry and later removed to the cross roads at "Rokawalkin Creek" which location is held in sacred memory by the Church today.

We would like to talk about the first Methodist Church built on the banks of Leonard's Mill Pond—a plain little square frame building which fell into complete ruin only a few years ago.

It would be pleasant to linger in memories of other days at old Spring Hill Episcopal Church which is familiar to us all and which links with its active service of today, the past with the present. Each of these is a story in itself.

So much of history, so much of achievement, sacred and social, cluster about these hallowed spots it scarce behoves us not to pause longer in reverence for those who have made the glorious present possible to us. But we can only take time to look and to bow our heads in silent gratitude for the pioneers of our faith, hoping that our brief study of today will so stimulate us that we will individually take time to learn more about and thus more

Page Seven

truly appreciate the noble lives of those who have bequeathed to us a "land of the free and a home of the brave."

All along our historic old Wicomico we pass silent but stately monuments of the past. Here cluster rare tales of legend, romance, tragedy and heroism for on these shores the roving, care free Red Man met his new and strange white brother from the old world.

On our way up the river as we near Salisbury we pause long enough to see one of the lovely old Homesteads, still owned and beautifully kept up by a surviving member of the Somers and Gunby families who have owned it for several generations.

This is one of the choice show places of our county and one to which we all point with pride, as we tour around with our out of town guests. It still bears its patent name "Cherry Hill" and is owned and used, as a summer home, by one of our public-spirited fellow townsmen —Mr. L. W. Gunby.

From Cherry Hill we would like to take our canoe and paddle up Tony Tank Creek, like the Indian of old, but perhaps from the road-side, we'd better approach the picturesque Old Mill and the beautiful home which still bears its original Indian Name,—Tony Tank, for here with its quaint dreamy stream, its green hedges and flower-bordered grass, we can easily see the influence of old England in the remodeled Homestead of the Rider family. Here, as at Cherry Hill, we find what is noticeably true all over the Eastern Shore, the original homestead occupied by another generation of the old family. Mrs. A. J. Vanderbogart who lives at Tony Tank is a descendant of the Rider family. A little nearer Salisbury and on the West bank of the river, we see one of the many homes of the famous Handy family. We are all familiar with this homestead for it still carries its original name, Handy Hall.

At every point of our journey today the lure to linger and tell this story and that superstition is most insistent, but a personally conducted 20th century tour must run on schedule time and we hear our conductor calling "next stop—Salisbury Town", for this was our Charter name given to us at birth August 8th, 1732.

Page Eight

The charter for the town of Salisbury is ancient, unique, and interesting. It was granted the year Geo. Washington was born. Salisbury has been located in three counties.

The late Mr. Ebernezer Wailes used to say that he had lived in three counties, and yet had always lived in Salisbury.

Our Town Charter, granted August 8th, 1732 contained 15 acres lying between the forks of the Wicomico River, and beginning at the point commonly called Handy's Landing. This point is near the Pivot Bridge at the foot of Main street, which used to be known as Bridge Street, and one of the original Town bounders may still be seen in the Alley Way and on the building line of the Farmers and Planters Co. One of the original bounders for the entire patent of Pemberton's Good Will, of which Salisbury was a part, may be seen along the railroad near the northern end of Mill Street. From here the land extended almost to the Middle Neck section.

This land whose patent name was "Pemberton's Good Will" was owned by William Winder, a minor, and the 15 acre section for Salisbury was laid out into 20 lots, the original owner to have his choice of two lots.

The remaining lots were to be taken up by others, no one person being allowed more than one lot during the first four months after the town was laid out and the said purchaser must be resident of the county. If at the end of six months the lots were not all taken up, on these conditions, sale was open to any other purchaser. All owners were required to build a house, covering 400 square feet, within the first eighteen months of purchase, or forfeit their title to the lot which was then put up at sale again for any person paying the sum first put upon the lot. Lots not taken up the first seven years after issue of the Town Charter were to revert to the original owner, Wm. Winder, who was "given the liberty to build upon the lots chosen for him so as the same be finished within 18 months after his arrival at full age."

The Charter stated: "The town is to be called Salisbury-Town. The Commissioners to employ a sufficient clerk, who, upon taking oath shall enter all their proceed-

Page Nine

ings, which entries, made up in a well-bound book, shall be lodged with the Clerk of Somerset County for the inspection of any person. A saving of rights to the Crown, the Lord Proprietor, all bodies politic and corporate and all others not mentioned in this Act. Possessors of lots to pay one penny current money per annum to his lordship and his heirs forever."

The growth of Salisbury from this time to the present is the enchanting story of life and its steady progress.

Salisbury was not a county seat in the early days and so was not the center for professional men and political leaders, but it has always been the home of a refined and cultured people. It has from early days been a recognized trade center and a point of commercial importance. Older residents, still living, tell us that long before the days of railroads it was no uncommon sight to see the streets lined with large wagons filled with lumber and grain from the East side of the county, brought here to be sold to our local merchants, who did a large business in buying and shipping lumber and grain to Baltimore by sailing vessels.

The water at Salisbury was not navigable for these schooners and shipments had to be carried 2½ miles down river on lighters to the deeper water at what was then known as the "Cotton Patch" near the mouth of Tony Tank Creek. Here they were reloaded on vessels, some of which had come from the West Indies with shipments of molasses and other products.

We are informed that among the successful pioneer merchants of our town were Mr. Jehu Parsons, the Byrd family, Mr. Jack White, Mr. Purnell Toadvine, Mr. Billy Freeny, all of whom have well known living descendants in town today.

Even within the memory of the youngest person present, marked and constant changes have occurred.

It is a long way from the present back to the typical Fair Day of other years.

This was an old British custom brought over by the early English settlers. These Fairs were held three times a year: Spring, Summer, and Fall but the Sum-

mer Fair was the real event. Merchants from Baltimore and Philadelphia came by boat and stage coach with quantities of merchandise, dry goods, and millinery to introduce the styles for the coming season. From every direction, with every possible means of conveyance, the neighborhood for miles around rolled in to Salisbury on Fair Day.

This old custom finally degenerated into a holiday for candy and lemonade booths and free fights, in the saloon days, until it has been lost as a community event.

Perhaps the oldest building we can claim is the beautiful old mansion known to us as "Poplar Hill", built of sturdy, hewn timbers, in 1795, now the home of Mr. G. W. D. Waller.

This land was a part of "Pemberton's Good Will" and associated with it are the names of Capt. John Winder, Major Levin Handy, Peter Dashiell, Dr. John Huston, Dr. Cathell Humphreys, Thomas Robertson and George Waller, father of the present owner. The two well known streets, Isabella and Elizabeth laid out on a part of this tract, were named for two of Dr. Huston's daughters.

The Poplar Hill Mansion is a pure type of colonial architecture within and without and the interior woodwork is famous for its design and workmanship.

Leading up to this old mansion was a long lane of Lombardy Poplars, from which, it took its name, and the lane extended to the corner of what we know as Poplar Hill and Broad Street.

We are all familiar with "Lemon Hill", at present the home of Mr. W. S. Gordy, Jr. This too was originally a part of Pemberton's Good Will. Its present name is derived from Dr. Richard Lemon, a bachelor physician, who lived there until his death in 1857, when it was purchased by Mr. Purnell Toadvin, father of our esteemed fellow townsman, Judge E. S. Toadvin.

For many years an old white oak tree, 10 feet in diameter, known as the "Baptist Tree" stood on this land. It was destroyed in the big fire of 1886.

Under this tree was preached the first Old School Baptist sermon ever heard on the Eastern Shore and up until

the time it was destroyed the Baptists at their Yearly Meeting always made a pilgrimage to this tree. The present estate with its beautiful house was purchased some years ago by a former resident of Salisbury, the late Mr. John D. Parsons, who, in his will, made provision for its ultimate use as a Home for the Aged.

It is said "all the world loves a lover" and connected with the early history of Lemon Hill is a pretty story of "ye olden days".

Romance has it that Dr. Lemon who never married, was an ardent suitor for the hand of Miss Ann Huston, daughter of Dr. John Huston. Miss Ann, attractive, capricious and pretty, like her type of all ages, had "a mind of her own" and for some reason John did not win out, tho Ann never married. Still pursuing, John remained a bachelor and one of his favorite remarks handed down to this generation is that he "knew one lady in town who could be married any day and any time she wanted to on a half hour's notice."

Another historic location in town has in later years been known as "The Oaks" and until recently was the beautiful home of the late Gov. E. E. Jackson and his family.

This property in earlier days was owned by General Humphrey Humphreys and was permitted by him to be used in such a manner that it became known to the general public as "The Park". It was a community rendezvous of pleasure for out-of-door life. Here the lad shot marbles and gathered acorns.

"Mammy" brought the baby for an airing. Fourth of July celebrations and May Day festivities with the crowning of the "Queen" were held here. It was a general family picnic ground.

Here also the local Brass Band gave Concerts. While perhaps it was even better known as "Lovers' Retreat" for many a happy romance began under the old oak trees which stand today as living, silent, age-old confidants of both Indian and Anglo Saxon.

Would it not be like a fairy tale come true to have some magic wand again convert it into a Park or a Community Center.

Page Twelve

Many of us still remember the old Mill Race, the Fish Hatchery and Mill Grove, the lovely old colonial home of Dr. Cathell Humphreys.

The patent name for this land was "Mill Grove." It was granted in 1744 by Lord Baltimore's heirs to one, John Caldwell, for the purpose of building "Ye Water Mill near Salisbury Town."

This was the first grist and saw mill in this locality and the dam was built by ox team and slave labor at a time when bear, deer, and Indians roamed this territory. The present home of the Wailes family, "Lakeside," and our Court House were originally a part of this tract which was at that time but a thickly wooded swamp.

The Mill has gone to decay, the old home has been divided into two large dwellings now standing on Circle Avenue, while the State Armory occupies part of the old colonial garden.

The Lake, known as Humphrey's Lake, on which many of us have gathered pond lilies in summer and skated in winter has become a center of Commercial life. Where the old ice boats used to race now the auto turns its speedy wheels. Modern up-to-date brick buildings stand on the old pond bottom while the widest bitulithic thoroughfare we have—East Main Street—runs directly across this one time fishing ground.

When the old dam broke, never to be repaired, we lost a charming spot of beauty and joy, but its reclamation for commercial use is the biggest engineering feature the City's life has ever known.

At the head of this Mill Pond was the cave of a reputed Revolutionary robber—Ben Allen—big, bold and terrorizing. Stories of his exploits and spoils have come down from generation to generation. In other days a real adventure for the town boy-life was to explore Ben Allen's cave in search of hidden treasure.

Another place of pride and beauty which some of us can remember and which has been removed by the hand of time and modern development was our well-known "Wicomico Falls". These extended from the present site of the Electric Light plant across to the flood gates on the "Jersey" side.

Page Thirteen

In my early childhood days our treasured Sunday afternoon diversion was to stand on the narrow boardwalk over this water way and see the Falls dash on the broken stone buttress below as the water merrily and ceaselessly journeyed on.

From here our walk continued under parental comradeship to the steamboat wharf which was another point of Community interest and to link those days with these, I might say "believe me" that trip was "*some excitement*" in those days.

According to the late Mr. Albert Stevens, the first bridge over the river connecting the present day Camden with the old Salisbury Town was a narrow wooden arched structure humped in the middle to allow barges and scows to pass under. With the building of this bridge houses began to go up across the river, until today it is the lovely residential section known as Camden.

We might cite many of the homes which once had spacious grounds and are now, by the march of progress and population occupying limited territory, notably the home of Col. Wm. J. Leonard which today is known as the M. P. Parsonsage. Eight large homes and the extension of a street, William from N. Division to Park Street, are now on the lot in the center of which this home formerly stood and this is within the memory of many of us present.

Handed down to us, by our ancestors, are so many tales of human interest centering about our own and other ancestral homesteads and persons of our town and county, we feel we have scarcely begun to mention this point, that persons contributing to the complete historic, civic, social and spiritual fabric of our community life.

We cannot stay to mention our many great men whose ability and personality have achieved big things. We have to pass over our fascinating legends and superstitions which are woven into the warp and woof of our native life. We can only scratch the surface in this mere sketch of what the past has done for the present.

Those who have made a study of it tell us that nowhere in our country can be found a purer strain of English blood than here on our Eastern Shore of Maryland. This is

bourne out by our customs and manners and by our family and geographical names. Mrs. Branch, the charming English woman, who so recently spoke at our Federation says the Eastern Shore of Maryland is more like old England than any place or people she has seen in her travels.

May we stay long enough just to mention the Mason and Dixon Line which was a marvelous piece of engineering in its day and which settled the long disputed claims of Lord Baltimore and William Penn and permanently settled the boundary lines between the provinces of Maryland, Delaware and Pennsylvania. The bounder marking the western end of the course from the starting point at Fenwick Island on the Atlantic coast, to the extreme southwest corner of Delaware lies in Wicomico Co., near the Horntown Mills. It bears the coat of arms of Lord Baltimore and of William Penn. It also bears the marks of age and the elements for it has remained unmoved by time or progress since 1763.

With this incomplete review of local history, may I propose a toast to our "Ain Countree."

*Here's to the Land where the Evergreens grow  
In the summer's sun and the wint'r's snow.  
Here's to the Land where the Oyster thrives  
Where the Terrapin crawls and the Wild Duck flies;  
Where the Crab abounds in Chesapeake Waters,  
The pride of Maryland's Sons and Daughters.  
Here's to the Land where Skies are bluest  
Home ties are strongest; Hearts are truest.  
Here's to the Sweetest Land I know  
The dear Home Land—The Eastern Sho'!*